

May 23, 2021
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 2 Thessalonians
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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THE RESTRAINER 2 Thessalonians 2:6-12

In our last study we concluded that the *man of lawlessness* was not an idea or a negative ideology or simply a picture of sin in the world. The definite articles intentionally identify him as a particular man. He will be THE man of THE lawlessness. That real person should not be viewed by us as an enigmatic, apocalyptic, mystery. Granted there were plenty of mysteries connected with end times, many of which have been revealed, explained, and cleared up by New Testament letters and especially the Revelation.

In the text before us, we are introduced to another figure who (or which) is connected with the last days. He (or some would say “it”) too is a bit mysterious or enigmatic. In his explanation of events connected with *the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ* (2:1), Paul introduces us to *what is restraining* (v.6), which he also refers to as *he who now restrains* (v.7). Are you confused yet? There are many ideas, statements, pictures like this that describe the last times, the Day of the Lord, for us.

Who or what is the “restrainer”? Who or what will he or it restrain? It is obvious from the text that the restrainer is right now working against the sin and lawlessness that is presently active in the world. Because that is true, we can only wonder and marvel at what this world will be like when the restraining element is taken away. Many of us already marvel at how quickly our American culture has abandoned the general principles of wisdom and orderliness found in God’s law. To us the culture looks like a boat that is adrift on a turbulent sea in a terrifying storm. What hope is there?

We hope in what God reveals to us in His Word. In the Bible, God reminds us that even in the hard-to-understand, mysterious end

times, our loving Heavenly Father will still control the reins and direct chaos to bring Himself glory. Ultimately, our Savior will come in glory and power and destroy the powers of darkness. He will especially go after the man of lawlessness and put an end to the influence of anti-godliness in the world. And we say along with the Apostle John, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

The Rebel is being restrained (v.6).

Our text begins with the good news that the lawless one is restrained. *And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time* (v.6). Something is restraining the lawless one for now. Referring to the man of the lawlessness, Paul reminded his readers that they already knew what is restraining him. It is a bit surprising to realize from this statement and a couple of previous statements Paul made, that even though these believers were basically “brand new,” Paul, Timothy, and Silas had already grounded them in teaching that is deemed confusing and unnecessary by most seminary graduates today.

One of those confusing questions is, “Why did Paul refer to the “restrainer” with the gender-less pronoun “what”? Actually, that word is implied by the verb restraining, which is a present active participle, accusative case, neuter gender. The neuter gender in this case expects us to translate it “what.” To restrain means to prevent, control, hinder, or hold down.

That brings up the unavoidable question, “What is controlling or holding down the spirit of antichrist that is already active in the world?” One answer to that question is that it is people who are telling the gospel. Another suggestion is that it is the nation of Israel. Or it could be the government (governing authorities in general) or the laws they enforce. Theological kind of answers might say that it is the Church’s influence as light and salt or it is Christians who are binding Satan.

But all of those suggestions are human powers which are clearly ineffective against the supernatural power of Satan. No, it is not likely that any kind of human authority or agency is the restrainer that holds down lawlessness. The restraining that holds down the full work of Antichrist now has to be a work of God Himself.

This restraint is active even though lawlessness is also active. *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work (v.7a)*. The work of lawlessness has been obvious from Eden up to the moment Paul wrote this letter. There has not been a time in history since the fall into sin that the world has been without active lawlessness. That truth was important to the Christians who read this letter because lawlessness was the reason behind their persecution. Lawlessness is still the reason for so much of our suffering even in “free” America.

It is rightly called lawlessness because the spirit of the age is opposed to God’s law. It is evident in godless political ideologies, godless education, godless religion, godless people in general. When we become agitated as we watch our culture drift into “Antichrist” philosophies and practices, we forget that such must be the case. That spirit is already alive and well and moving us toward the inevitable end as John wrote almost 2,000 years ago. *And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (1 John 4:3)*.

But how that lawlessness will explode in the coming of a particular person was a mystery revealed only by special divine revelation. In the New Testament, a mystery is something that was once concealed but which God has uncovered. For example, we are aware of the mystery that God allows the nation of Israel (as a whole) to be hardened against Him in this age (Romans 11:25). There is the mystery that living Christians will join with dead Christians to inherit glorified bodies at the Lord’s return (1 Corinthians 15:51). There is the mystery Paul wrote about of Christ’s relationship to the Church being illustrated in marriage (Ephesians 5:32). These deeper truths are understood only because of God’s supernatural revelation in His Word.

Likewise, the understanding of Antichrist comes from God’s revelation in His Word. We become so easily entrenched, even mesmerized, by the world we live in that we fail to observe God accomplishing His will one small step at a time. This is why the study of history is so enlightening for Christ’s followers. History truly is His-Story. Maybe that is why people driven by the spirit of antichrist are so passionate about re-writing history. There is little doubt that even the short world history of the past century reveals how we are

rapidly pushing toward the simple, revealed truths of our text. God wants us to know what He is doing and where we are headed.

The mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but we are confident that the lawless One will be revealed. Paul promised that *he will be revealed in his time (v.6b)*. The good news is that the man of the lawlessness will be revealed. The word translated “revealed” is the Greek word *apokolupto*, which means just that. It means to be uncovered, exposed, revealed. This word is aorist tense, passive voice which promises that the revealing is definitely going to happen but the guy is not going to do the revealing. God is going to uncover him.

God has already determined the timetable for this man and his work. When, according to God’s schedule, it is time for him to be revealed to the world, he will be uncovered. Daniel’s prophecy indicates that for 3 ½ years this man will present himself as a friend of the Jews, a kind, compassionate, caring world leader. But exactly on God’s timetable, God will uncover him for what he is. At which time he will desecrate the newly built temple by setting up an image of himself in it, demand to be worshiped as God, and unleash ferocious persecution against the Jews.

This is a promise from God. We need to believe it rather than attempt to turn it into a fairy tale. We should not try to spiritualize it. We should just take it at face value. We need to believe God’s promise and then live like we believe it. That means that we will not go to pieces when we see our neat and orderly world falling into the downward path that inevitably leads to godlessness. Rather we will set our hope on the wonderful promises that Christ will save His people from the wrath to come.

Because we believe God’s promise, we need to live like these young Christians in Thessalonica who believed God’s promises. Paul commended them in the first letter, *For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)*. Notice three things we believe about this promise. God raised Jesus, God the Son, from the dead (v.10b). Jesus, God the Son, is in heaven (v.10a). Jesus, God the Son, is returning from heaven to deliver us from the

wrath to come (v.10). That we believe this is evident by our separation from idols and to God (v.9).

But when will this revelation take place? Our text promises that the man of lawlessness will be revealed when the “Restrainer” is removed. *Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way (v.7b)*. It is important for us to realize that the text literally reads, *He alone is holding down now until from the middle he might move*. The verb “restrains” is a key to interpretation in this statement. In this statement (contrasted with the same word in v.6), the verb *restrains* is a present active participle, nominative case, masculine gender. It is of the masculine gender so that it matches the masculine definite article “he.”

Now we realize that in God’s timing the Holy Spirit will remove His restraint, He will “get out of the middle of it.” Right now the Holy Spirit is restraining the lawlessness of sin. But in God’s timing He will release His restraint, though He Himself will still be actively saving people even during the Tribulation. John saw the promise of this wonderful truth and wrote, *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)*.

Okay, but who or what are those people? That is what John wondered. *Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:13-14)*. Oh wow! An innumerable host of people will be saved during the Tribulation. The Holy Spirit has to be here on earth still saving people.

But He will withdraw His restraint against sin during that time. What will it look like when the Holy Spirit withdraws His restraining? It will look like the proliferation of sin when God turns sinners over to their sin. Paul described that horrible condition in Romans 1. *For although they knew God, they did not honor him as*

*God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up** to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:21-32)*.

Earth will be an awful place when God reveals the man of lawlessness and the Holy Spirit withdraws His restraint against sin.

God Will Accomplish His Plan.

We should be glad to hear that God will do as He has planned because at times it appears that Satan is all-powerful (vv.9-10). So, too, in the Tribulation times the lawless one will demonstrate great power. *The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders (v.9)*.

This means that Satan will authorize and empower the Antichrist. Because Satan is determined to be like the Most High (Isaiah 14:14), he desires to incarnate himself. But Satan cannot send another part of himself to earth to be a man like the Triune God does.

There is not Satan the father, Satan the son, and Satan the unholy spirit. But acting like an angel of light, he will empower a human to do astonishing works, signs, and wonders.

There are examples in Scripture of how Satan has already done this. To a point, Satan inspired magicians in Egypt who copied some of God's miracles (staffs turned into snakes, water turned to blood, frogs on the land). We read about Elymas the magician, servant of Satan, who did signs (Acts 13:8). The demon-possessed girl in Philippi could tell fortunes (Acts 16:16).

Antichrist will have the full power of Satan to do false signs and wonders. They will be false because they will not be generated by God. They will be false because they will not testify to the truth of God. They will be false because they will not motivate people to believe and obey God.

The result of the mighty, powerful deceptive signs by Antichrist is that many people will be deceived. *And with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (v.10)*. It will be wicked deception. Of course, Satan's work is always wicked. Because he is opposed to God, nothing Satan does can be considered righteous or holy. His purpose is always to deceive. He proved that from the beginning in his conversation with Eve. He proves that as he and his false teachers make themselves out to be angels of light. Paul warned us and Corinthian believers, *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:13-14)*. Satan and his teachers are not light bearers but pretend to be. They are false apostles, deceitful workmen.

Obviously, the plan in the Tribulation will be for people to believe that Antichrist is from God, in league with God, maybe even a Christian of sorts. If so, he would look like so many false teachers today who claim to be Christians but who serve self and Satan.

As result, the ones who are perishing will be deceived. Most of the people who will be experiencing the Great Tribulation are in the process of perishing. There will be the multitude who trust Christ and are saved who are not deceived and not perishing. All the rest are chosen to be saved and must, therefore, perish for eternity. People

like that are deceived by Satan's lies and are perishing in every age of human history.

Those people will be perishing and be deceived because they reject God's truth. . . *because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (v.10b)*. The person who refuses to believe the truth of the Bible has no choice but to fall for the deception of Satan. The difference between the saved and the perishing is made obvious by their response to the Bible. Some people are convicted by Bible truth, repent of sin, believe Christ and are saved. Some people are convicted by Bible truth, then reinterpret it so that they can deceive themselves about their relationship to truth and God – they are perishing. Some people are never convicted by Bible truth and reject it outright – they are perishing.

The beautiful picture this passage draws is that ultimately, God is in control (vv.8, 11-12). People will be deceived most because God Himself will send delusion to sinners. When that happens they must believe falsehood. That can do no other. *Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false (v.11)*. It is a horrible situation when a person chooses not to believe the Bible. It is terrible when a person buys into the lies of a world opposed to God. It is impossibly condemning when a person is overwhelmed by strong delusion sent by God. This would be like the contrary spirit God used to send to King Saul who rejected God. In the Tribulation, every single person who is not born again will buy into the idea that Antichrist is a savior.

God will justifiably condemn those people. They will be deceived *in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (v.12)*. Notice two characteristics of those who are condemned. They refused to believe the truth. Very intelligently like Pilate they might ask sneeringly, "What is truth?" They enjoy the pleasure of unrighteousness. Chasing the pleasure of this world looking for satisfaction was sufficient for them.

But the party comes to a quick and deadly end when God reveals and destroys the lawless one. He will reveal the lawless one on His terms and in His timing. *And then the lawless one will be revealed (v.8a)*. For 3 ½ years people will be deceived into believing that Antichrist is the savior of the broken, crime-ridden, fallen world.

After the people who are destined to perish have received his mark, being fully identified with him, God will reveal who he really is.

Finally, Jesus will kill the lawless one with a word. He *whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth (v.8b)*. In the last battle, the Lord Jesus only needs to breath destruction on Antichrist. He who ruled the world through the power of Satan will be destroyed and his spirit will live forever in the lake of fire. Like all previous would-be world rulers, the lawless one will fail. Jesus will kill him *and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming (v.8c)*.

When Jesus shows up, the game is over. All the promises, all the power, all the destruction Antichrist brought will come to an end. And we are looking so forward to that day. We grow discouraged to watch sin proliferate in our culture. We often feel powerless to stem the tide. Actually, we are powerless. We have just perused God's plan. It is the unchanging, eternal plan of the Triune Godhead. It is going to come to pass, and we can rejoice that it will because our Creator and our Savior will bring it about as He promised.